

By our special correspondent
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'The Green Green Grass of Home'

It is probably the most recognisable leaf symbol in the world. Like a hand, its palmate leaves are spread like flourishing green fingers. The Cannabis Sativa has been immortalised in songs, worn as jewellery and woven into fabric. It can be eaten or drunk as a tea, but mostly it is smoked, illegally of course, because it is a classified drug.

While cannabis is thought to be one of the least harmful of illicit substances, and despite recent research to the contrary, it is the drug of choice for Africans with some 52.8 million users on the continent, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the 2010 World Drug Report.

In the greater scheme of things, with worldwide cannabis use estimated at between 129-191 million, Africa's consumption accounts for more than a quarter and is probably a much higher percentage given the lack of quantitative information. What can be determined though, from 73% of responding African states, is that there are indications that cannabis use is increasing.

More widely used for recreational purposes than medicinal, cannabis is sold either as a herb or a resin, but in both cases it is the chemical compound tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) that creates the major psychoactive sensations experienced by the user. THC is found in the tiny hairs of the tips of the flowers. In its herbal form the flowers, leaves and stalks are dried out to basically create a smoke-able product. In this guise it has many names, marijuana, weed, pot, dope. In Africa it is more commonly known as Matokwane.

The resinous form of cannabis is called hashish (or hash) and has a high potency level. Resin from the flower tips is separated, filtered (many times) and crushed until a pure compound of THC remains. During this process the plant also releases a natural oil which allows the resin to stick together, which is then formed into a brick and sliced for sale. Resinous cannabis does not have as high a demand in Africa as herbal cannabis, largely because of the financial impact of processing and trafficking/transport.

Either way growing the ubiquitous plant is relatively easy, its not called Weed for nothing, and cultivators are able to camouflage it quite easily in crops of wheat, maize and sugar, or practice guerrilla farming by planting it in remote areas such as forest clearings where it is not easily detectable. Production is less demanding in terms of labour and water requirements than most legally farmed cash crops and if it is dried well, it can be stored for up to a year.

In Africa cannabis is also perceived as a 'compensation crop', where food harvest losses in soil fertility, erosion or drought have halted legitimate profitable agriculture. Such farmers have an economic desperation in order to cater to the basic needs of their families. This is proving to be the case in Lesotho where many farmers claim that cannabis farming is simply a matter of survival, especially for those retrenched from South African mines.

Cannabis was reported, in 2007, to be the third largest source of income for Lesotho with 70% of its production

entering South Africa which landlocks the tiny state. Some consider it the nation's most significant cash crop but once again, finding any accurate assessment is very difficult.

Dr Julian Bloomer, while at the University of Dublin Trinity College, spent 12 months living in a local rural community in Lesotho, in order to research for his 2008 published thesis titled, A political ecology approach to extra-legal rural livelihoods: A Lesotho-based case study of cultivation of and trade in cannabis. He confirms that establishing both accurate production and consumption levels of cannabis at national level in Africa is a task fraught with many difficulties.

"UNODC's assessments are primarily based on correlating ancillary indicators such as cannabis seizures and transforming them into presumed levels of production. Since attitudes in national law enforcement and judicial agencies vary widely throughout Africa, it's very hard to accurately establish production, let alone consumption levels."

Bloomer makes another significant point: "Bear in mind that cannabis grown in Africa undoubtedly contains significantly lower levels of THC than the high-potency ('skunk') varieties produced in Europe and North America." His qualitative data collection involved two crop surveys and a household survey that focused on demographic information, crop production figures and income and expenditure data.

In Bloomer's thesis, he states that cannabis cultivation and trade in Lesotho is an "extra-legal rural livelihood strategy". He adopted this phrase to highlight the active involvement of official authorities in the trade and the importance, he says, of recognising a criminalised network that stretches between formal and informal political and economic structures.

Bloomer undertook many interviews with key informants such as police officers, chiefs and politicians and finally concluded that any drug control policies that attempt to reduce cannabis production in Lesotho would have a large and serious impact on a crucial coping strategy for marginalised rural households.

Lesotho farmers are desperate and while many don't agree with the end purpose of such production – that of recreational drug use and the possible long-term addiction of users – they emphasise that there are medicinal benefits and of course, without a demand they would be worsening dire straits.

The UNODC estimated in 2007, that at least 43 African countries experienced cannabis production. This accounted for more than 25% of global cannabis production. Zambia and Nigeria are the biggest users on the continent with 17.7% and 13.8% estimated users in the 15-64 age group.

In the first six months of last year, Operation Burn the Weed programme in Nigeria reportedly destroyed 85 hectares of cannabis farmland. The programme was set up by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) who often encounter tented camps on the



Left: Dr. Julian Bloomer

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plantations, with farmers willing to defend their harvest with guns, machetes and the like. The effect of such enforcement saw the price of a 7-10 kg bag rise from N15 000 to N130 000 but seizures for that period totalled a decent 8 763 693 kg.

Africa has a long relationship with cannabis particularly from a cultural point of view, with many tribal customs

using it as a means to invoke the spirits of their ancestors or provide them with extraordinary powers. The famous explorer David Livingstone was not fooled however when he witnessed the use of cannabis by the Makololo people. "It makes them feel very strong in body," he said, "but it produces exactly the opposite effect upon the mind."